

[The Burns Family]

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LIFE HISTORY

FOLKLORE, FLORIDA

Mrs. W.W.Woods

Princeton, Fla.

Dec. 30, 1938

Gladys Buck

THE BURNS FAMILY

The first one-half mile of Coconut Palm Drive, west of Princeton, Florida is typical of rural life in the Redland District in that all types of families live there, the poorest, the middle class the wealthiest, and the foreigners.

Here, the children gather to play on the road after school and on holidays. They skate, play ball, tag, chase each other, and fight. When a car passes by, they scatter like so many chickens on both sides of the road. The coral rock formation of the soil makes it impossible for them to play in the yards and fields as the jagged rocks not only tear feet and shoes to pieces but great damage is done if one happens to fall.

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In the center of these childish activities and back from the road is the Burns headquarters. Large and unpainted, framed by the dark green of mango, citrus and guava trees, the old house is occupied only by Ella Burns and her daughter Leona, with her three children. However, the Burns have a large family connection widely scattered, who meet at this home on the slightest pretext.

This house is typical of the older houses in the new section 2 which was a wilderness not more than forty years ago. It is high off the ground and has high walls and a steep shingle roof. A long rambling porch covers two sides and is decorated by an ornamental balustrade.

"Come on back here," called Mrs. Burns, when I knocked, "I's busy." I went through the dining room which has the large shiny oak table pushed back to the wall. The straight back oak chairs have cretonne pillows, there is an electric ice box and the floor is entirely covered with a brownish linoleum.

This room is used for a parlor also, the original parlor having been utilized for an extra bed room, since part of the house has been rented as an apartment. The "parlor bedroom" is curtained off with thick dark green material which hangs on a sagging string.

Next I passed through a bright cheerful bedroom. The walls and woodwork were painted cream and gay cretonne is hung at the windows. The dresser is draped with the same pattern of cretonne and two double beds are neatly made with lovely tufted spreads.

In the neat and orderly kitchen, Ella is grating "[eddie?]," the root of a plant which looks like the elephant ear. She is a tall, grey haired old woman wearing a longer than average print dress with long sleeves.

All of this family are tall and dark, with high cheek bones, showing their Indian descent. Ella says that they are "Indian, English and Scotch mixed."

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Ella's face is happy and healthy looking and radiates the good spirit found in this home. Her voice is high and peculiar to the families from the British West Indies who have settled in this section. The E's are all long and drawn out. V's are pronounced as W's.

Ella calls every one "Honey" pronounced with an exceedingly long E, and says "Ayeeee" when she does not understand what is being said.

"Plaintains, horse banana, is a good dish. We boil them with meat when they are still green or slice them and fry them like potato chips in grease. You don't know what you miss by not having them," Ella explains as she grates away on the eddie.

The eddie roots are shredded and mixed as "a potato pone," with cocoanut, spices, eggs, sugar and butter. When baked, it is a most unappetizing dish to look at but one mouthful will make one forget the appearance for it is most delicious despite its 4 greyish, gluey look.

"Mr. Burns come over here from Grand Cayman a year before I did, " she continues, as her hands fly up and down with the grating. "He cleared a grass piece and built a house for us before we come over." Here I interrupted to find out what a "grass piece" is and was told that in the country they left there was not much grass and when one found a piece of land with grass growing on it, that was taken for a home and farming.

The grass piece and home are still on the old Naranja road. Helen, one of the daughters, and her four children occupy it. The house is tall, high off the ground, unpainted and back from the road.

"What for you want to know about us?" asks Ella, "We're just plain folks." I explained to her that plain folks was what I wanted to know about. She seemed to be satisfied with this and started telling me about her children.

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"Ethel, Lilly and Helen was born over there and Leona and Villiam (William) was born here. Ethel married an advertising man from New York and lives up there. She has three children. Lilly married a lumberman in Miami and lives there, she has five children. Helen married a fruit packer and left him after she had 5 four children. She lives in the old house. Villiam married a girl from New York and lives in Miami. They have twin children. Leona married a boy from the North. She left him because he would not support her and the three children. She had to live at home most of the time so she decided to stay here.

"Papa worked at anything he could find to do when he first come over here; he grubbed palmetto roots, worked at the saw mill, helped with the grove planting and any thing that come to hand. We never had any more than we needed but, at the same time, we always had plenty. Why, I can remember when I was a kid that all the other kids thought we were rich. But back in those days it didn't take much to be classed as well-to-do. In fact, it's getting back to that stage now," says Leona, who operates a little dress store in Princeton. "I went into this store with the idea of being independent and making it possible to get along without the pension which [?] receives. So far it has cost me every week since I have been open, but I can't afford to give up until the season is over, at least. I rent the store and work on a percentage basis and some weeks my rent cannot be paid with my part of the profit."

"Every one of us five children finished the eighth grade except Villiam and he only went to the sixth. We all married young and didn't realize how much a good education would mean to us until 6 it was too late. I want my kids to get an education if nothing else," Leona states as she washes dishes and helps her mother with the kitchen.

Ella is much beloved by all of her children and grandchildren as well as the many other relatives and in-laws. At Christmas and all other holidays, in fact for no reason at all, they meet and bring baskets of food to enjoy the day together[.?] The many youngsters play in

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harmony while the adults get together in large and small groups, some serious and some gay.

At these family reunions the adults always have wine or beer to drink though none of them have ever been known to get drunk. They dance, and Ella dances as much as the younger ones, nor does she ever lack for a partner for she is a good dancer and always keeps a laugh going in any group.

When any of the children bring a bottle of wine or whiskey home, Ella hides it and takes a nip when she wishes for "cramps." She just laughs when asked why she hides the bottle.

All of these people have their share of work to do and not one of them would think of leaving theirs for another to do. Even the smallest child has his part which is done on time and without any argument.

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Leona does the family "wash." This has been her work for years and now that she has the store she does it after she closes store, sometimes working until far into the night. In the small kitchen, the washing machine is dragged from behind the door and the water is pumped from the old hand pump and heated on an oil stove. The whole family gathers around the table and, above the noise of the machine, shout and laugh at one another. The laundry is made ready to hang and is left for the children to hang before school the next morning.

I asked Ella whether she thought a car or home more important. "Well," she replied, "sometimes you have to have a car to get enough money to buy a home and then again if you have a car you will spend all of your money chasing around in it and will never have enough money to buy a home.

"I don't know what it would be like not to have a home," she continued. "I have always had one. I think a home is much more important." Leona added, "So do I." Then, Ella went

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on to tell of her husband homesteading the old place in Naranja. He bought this house, where they now live, during the boom. "Paid ten thousand dollars for it, too." Here Leona interrupted to tell me that he paid cash for it.

"I believe in folks paying for what they get. Believe me, I 8 don't want to be saddled to a bunch of debts all my life. When I get an extra dollar, I like to be able to spend it for a show or some other amusement and not feel like I am stealing it.

"I think one of the most dishonest things a person can do is to spend money for foolishness when they owe it to some one who has trusted them.

"We don't have any thing charged but our groceries and, when I get my check, I pay that bill and if there is any thing left over I spend it for other necessities but I pay that bill first," Leona tells me, while her mother went to the door to talk with the woman who has an apartment in the back of the house. "We get five dollars a month out of that apartment and that takes care of the light bill. Ethel [sends?] mama a check every month, and with what I get from the county, we have about sixty dollars a month. Mama, the three kids, and I live on that and we live about as well as most folks. We dress as well as the average and eat just about what we want.

"What dat you say about eating?" asked Ella as she returned to the kitchen. "I was saying that we have all we want to eat and do have well balanced meals altho we do not spend a lot of time studying charts," replied Leona.

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"Yes, all of us have well balanced meals except mama sad she will cook anything she can get her hands on." Leona and her mother both laughed heartily at this and said that they had forgotten that every thing they said might be held against them. "Well, its the truth, any way, so let it go," finished Leona. "When I gets hungry for anything, I eat it," said Ella. "I don't care whether the book says to eat it or not. I get along pretty good. My health is better than most people's of my age. Yes, I eat what I want and ask no questions about it."

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Every one laughed as they always do when Ella starts talking. She gets a great kick out of life.

“We take things as they come and don't complain. No, we aren't completely satisfied with what we have but I guess we don't have strong feelings about things like some folks. The main objection to our life is that we don't have enough money to do with as we please. If we had a hundred dollars a month we could get along fine—a hundred and fifty would be a lot better.

“We haven't always been poor like we are now. But, even now, we have more than many people who have plenty of money. We have our health, we love one another, and get along good together. That's [something?] that money can't buy. There's no disgrace in our family and we all serve the Lord altho we are not narrow minded 10 and have a good time.” As Leona finished speaking all was quiet for a moment, then Ella spoke.

“Leona is talking about keeping the store open on Sunday but I told her I was going to leave if she started that. We have to have her at home sometime and not only that, the Lord didn't intend for us to work on Sunday. If we can't make a living in six days, one more day won't help much.”

“Don't worry mama, that was Henry's idea to begin with and I am not keen about it any way.” Leona told her.

Henry is Leona's sweetheart. They have been “going together” for five years and are planning to get married as soon as he has a job that will support them. “Something permanent,” says Leona.

“We are getting along alright now on the thirty I get from the county. That's not much but it will stop if I get married and I am not going to take any chances. I would like to be married and have a home of my own and I do love Henry but I am not going to take any chances. If

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it were only Henry and I, I would not hesitate but I have there children and they have to be fed, clothed, and educated. I am not going to jump out of the frying pan into the fire.”

“Henry has a job now selling insurance, and I believe he is 11 going to make good at it. We are both hoping to be able to get married soon.” Leona stopped speaking for a moment and then looked up and said, “We would not be happy, anyway, if we always had to be struggling for rent and food and clothing. We would soon be fighting and unhappy. No, we won't get married until Henry is able to support us properly.”

We started talking about politics and I discovered that the whole large family is Democratic. “We may split our vote sometimes but, on the whole, we stick to our party,” Leona said, and Ella announced that she only voted if she felt like it.

“My one little vote don't make no diff'rence nohow. Lilly, my daughter who lives in Miami, don't think it's the woman's place to vote. She and I usually leave voting alone, but we are strong Democrats just the same,” said Ella.

“Just like we are Democrats, we are Methodists,” Leona declared. “We are religious and have our principals but we are not narrow. We may not always live up to our standards but, at least, we have them. Religion does not influence my morals at all but I believe that it does mama's. How about it, mama?”

“I don't go to the shows and fishing on Sunday, if that's what you mean,” Ella replied. “I can remember when all my kids 12 would have thought it wrong to go to shows on Sunday, but they are taking on all of the new fangled ideas that most folks seem to have these days and I reckon its all right for them, but not for me. I just wouldn't feel right about it. I don't mind the kids having a good time at any thing they want to do as long as it's decent.”

I asked Ella how much money they spent for doctor and hospital bills, and she seemed to think it a good joke.

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"We don't spend no money like dat, honey. We doctor's our own self unless there's something bad wrong with us and that don't happen very often. Leona had a goiter, and she spent quite a bit for treatments for that a couple of years ago. I had to take some [irrigations?] not long ago for constipation, but I takes mineral oil now and I am never bothered with it any more. Vill (William) is the doctor in our family. He is always running to the doctor about something and then he comes home and preaches to us. We calls him Doc Woods. (Woods) Dat big fat healthy thing is always afraid there's something wrong with him."

"We haven't had any hospital bills at all. Did you know that I was a practical nurse and that I helped with all of the babies and most all the sickness when I first come down here? Old Doctor 13 Tower would not have known what to do without me back in the early days."

When asked about work, she said that work had never hurt any one in her family and Leona spoke, "Mama is the only one in the family who ever has done very much work. She is always busy, from morning to night. That makes the rest of us sound lazy but we are not. We all work and do our work well but none of us work as much as mama does."

Bathroom facilities are also a joke to the Burns. They say they have "outside plumbing" and that they make their wash tubs serve a two-fold purpose. "They are for washing clothes and taking baths, too. We have to drag them in every night, pump water to fill them, and then drag them out. The girls get a tub and bathe first. When they have finished the boys, take their turn. We always have lots of fun and laughter at our bath time. By the time we have all had a bath, the kitchen floor is ready to mop and the day is ended.

"We follow about the same routine all year long," I was told when the question was asked. "I guess life would be mighty monotonous for us if we couldn't enjoy one another."

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"You and Helen didn't seem to be enjoying one another last 14 night when you had that fuss," Ella said. "Oh, well, fussing is just another way of breaking the monotony," was Leona's answer, "we get along pretty good most of the time."

Ella said proudly, "I have never had to ask the church or any one else to help me but I do think that the church should help the needy when it's possible for them to do so. I go to church every Sunday if I am not sick or unless there is some other good reason for not going."

Ella has a garden in her back yard planted in "pumpkins and cassava. "Last year, we had a couple of water melons that didn't turn out so well but they were sure fine looking," Ella told me. "Hey! Don't give mama credit for those watermelons," laughed Leona, "The kids planted them and they wouldn't like it.

"Where do we go to court?" said Leona surprisedly. "Why we court just anywhere. All over the house and all over the country. At our sister's houses, uncles houses, at the picture shows, skating rinks, golf links, dances or just anywhere we happen to be when it suits our humor to court."

Reference :

Interviews and personal observation.